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Perspective

2000-01

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Boston University Center for the Study of Conflict, Ideology, and Policy

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/3574>

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PERSPECTIVE

Volume 10, No 3 (January-February 2000)

Portrait of Putin's Past

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Why is so little known about the KGB career of Russia's acting President Vladimir Putin? Most reporting on both sides of the Atlantic is thinly sourced, if sourced at all, and often conflicting. Was Putin a professional foreign intelligence cadre officer whose experience abroad exposed him to reformist ideas, as many claim? If so, how was he, the first Russian leader since Andropov to have lived abroad, and the leader who lived abroad the longest since Lenin, exposed to enlightened thinking from his isolated outpost in Erich Honecker's East Germany? If Putin wasn't a cadre intelligence officer, what was he?

Determining with which part of the KGB Putin identifies himself will help determine what shaped his professional formation and experience and could serve as a guidepost toward the direction in which he will lead Russia. The KGB was no monolith. Its sprawling bureaucracy and diverse functions employed polished spies steeped in Western ways, scholars, linguists, mathematicians, engineers, paper-pushing bureaucrats, guardsmen, and the ubiquitous thugs, snoops and dissident-hunters that formed the core of the KGB ethos.

The dearth of hard facts about Putin's KGB career and the official silence, combined with the Andropov-style myth-making about Russia's new leader (alleging him to have been everything from a quiet monitor of pro-glasnost' East Germans to a Russian James Bond who recruited hordes of Westerners), indicate that something about Putin's KGB past is hidden. We knew as much if not more in 1990 about Soviet KGB Chairman Vladimir Kryuchkov's intelligence career than we know in 2000 about Putin's.

Not even Russia's best journalists have been able to pin down the man who succeeded Boris Yel'tsin(1) German intelligence and counterintelligence officials give superficial, conflicting accounts of Putin, and the German press has been no better. Asked about Putin's work in Dresden from 1984 to 1990, a German BND intelligence spokeswoman said, "It's difficult to say exactly what he did."(2) Informed American intelligence veterans do not paint a uniform portrait either. While some aren't so sure, several interviewed for this article say with complete confidence that Putin was a Line X officer in Directorate T, the scientific and technology-theft unit of the First Chief Directorate.(3) That may well be, though most Directorate T officers had engineering and scientific backgrounds,(4) and Putin studied law. His thesis adviser at Leningrad State University says the law faculty produced "administrators, not lawyers," 70 percent of whom went into the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), with most of the rest going into local governments and the party apparat. Only a select few, he said, made it into the KGB.(5)

Upon graduating from law school in 1975, Putin reportedly worked at the Leningrad KGB office in Service No. 1, not the First Chief Directorate, trying to recruit foreigners. He remained on the job for nine years. However, no one can account for what he did at that time, and there is a question about whether he began his intelligence career in the KGB. An official biography of Putin posted on the Russian National News Service web site in 1997 states that Putin began his career as a GRU military intelligence officer. That information was deleted from subsequent biographies.(6) Finally in 1984 he took a year-long course at the KGB Red Banner Institute of Intelligence (now the Andropov Institute) for training abroad, and was assigned the following year to East Germany, where he remained until 1990.(7) Some official reports say his job in Dresden was to monitor East German political developments.(8)

Blank Biography 'Being Filled with Fiction'

Beyond that, details are murkier. What is known, according to Yevgenia Albats, is that Putin's blank biography is being filled with fiction. "Among the myths that are already building around Putin--some peddled purposefully by his staff--is that he was a career intelligence officer, a member of the KGB's elite crew of superspies: well-educated,

posted abroad, sophisticated in the ways of the outside world, particularly in Western business practices," writes Albats with a colleague. "Those jobs almost exclusively went to the sons of the KGB and Communist Party elite, and that was a club to which Vladimir Putin never belonged."(9)

One must conclude that Putin has something to hide. This suggests that whatever he did in the KGB was not standard intelligence collection or agent operations--which continue to be held in high esteem by most Russians--but something that would offend even the very public that backs his campaign of "liquidation" and "extermination," in his words, of the population in Chechnya.

That narrows things down to two: domestic spying/political repression, and involvement in illicit "economic operations." Based outside the USSR in East Germany, Putin presumably was a cadre officer in the First Chief Directorate, the most prestigious part of the KGB that was spun off and renamed the External Intelligence Service (SVR) in 1991. That being the case, he would have been far removed from repression and from the domestic political spying that continued through perestroika. As likely as that may be, room for doubt exists--and that doubt is cast from a very unusual source. Vladimir Kryuchkov, a career Soviet foreign intelligence officer who headed the KGB between 1988 and the coup he helped to hatch in 1991, led the First Chief Directorate when Putin was assigned to East Germany. Kryuchkov said he traveled to East Germany frequently and knew his officers there. Putin, he told Moskovsky novosti, was "not a cadres intelligence officer" and "certainly never reported to me." Kryuchkov added that Putin "was commissioned by another part of the KGB to work with us" in the First Chief Directorate.(10)

Kryuchkov did not specify which part of the KGB commissioned Putin, but he indicated clearly that it was outside the First Chief Directorate. Lawyer-administrator Putin was unlikely to have been an officer in communications and cryptography, border troops, operational-technical work, guards or signals intelligence. He could have been with the counterintelligence chief directorate, the economic counterintelligence directorate, or the

surveillance directorate, but why he would hide such connections is unclear. Or he could have been attached to the KGB's rather mundane administrative units.

Radio Liberty analyst Victor Yasmann raises the possibility that Putin was an officer in the Fifth Chief Directorate, the KGB division that served as the political police, ideological enforcement and domestic spying unit. Though the Fifth was almost purely an internal operation--it ran the informant networks and psychiatric prisons, maintained the secret political dossiers on individuals, persecuted dissidents and religious believers, and served as the backbone of the latter-day Soviet police state--it did maintain a foreign presence to watch Soviet citizens abroad and to liaise with the political police sections in satellite regimes like East Germany. According to KGB documents acquired by Yasmann, the KGB's domestic directorates expanded their own lines of foreign intelligence functions in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The Fifth Chief Directorate conducted ideological intelligence operations abroad, including agents of influence and working with the intelligentsia.(11)

While the First and Fifth Chief Directorates in the glasnost' period sought out Communist leaders in Soviet bloc countries who supported Gorbachev-style reforms, the Fifth was also at work in the region on another project, as East Germany's Gauck Commission discovered. The Interlinked System for Recognizing Enemies was a KGB operation to monitor anti-Soviet political dissent in East Germany and elsewhere. The de-Stasification Commission led by the Rev. Joachim Gauck discovered the Interlinked System while uprooting and cataloguing the Stasi networks. "Information concerning anything that qualified as a threat to the system was sent there [to Moscow] and investigated," according to Gauck. "Particular cases were analyzed and appropriate tactics were devised for them. It was enough for someone to be considered--only potentially--an opponent of the system, and the appropriate actions were initiated: He was put under surveillance and information was collected on him...and his case would end up in headquarters in Moscow."(12)

We have few details about how the Interlinked System for Recognizing Enemies actually worked, but the name alone suggests it was not a glasnost'-type of operation. Its modus operandi that Gauck described and the consequent KGB liaison with the political police divisions of bloc security services indicate involvement of the Fifth Chief Directorate.

The Fifth was the only part of the KGB to fall into total disgrace. It was officially abolished as domestic criticism of the KGB swelled in 1989, but in fact was merely renamed.(13) By late 1991 it was broken apart. Most of the structure became the core of the new Tax Police, and many of its officers went into politics or the private sector, with others reassigned to other security posts. Some made their way to the top of the Russian internal security system.(14)

Returning from East Germany in 1990 after playing his bit part in the failure to retain Soviet control, Putin reportedly was reassigned to the unprestigious personnel directorate, then went into the active reserves at Leningrad State University as an assistant to the deputy dean--a dead-end post that would have relegated him to snooping on foreign students and on the university's widening international contacts. He quit the KGB, officially at least, in 1991 to serve as a deputy to his former law professor, St. Petersburg Mayor Anatoly Sobchak. Here, Putin's vita is inconsistent: He says he quit in 1991, but his official Kremlin resume says he resigned a year later.(15) Many St. Petersburg democrats believe the KGB assigned him there: "Infiltrating newly emerging civic groups and other institutions was common practice at the time," according to Albats.(16)

Leonid V. Shebarshin, a deputy chairman of the KGB from 1989 to 1991, says it is quite likely that the KGB "sanctioned" Putin's move to Sobchak's office: "What Putin was doing in his work in the Leningrad administration naturally was of some interest to the service." The KGB, Shebarshin said, "was interested in having its own man in the administration."(17) There, Putin earned the nickname "Stasi"(18)--not a name likely to be conferred on a foreign intelligence officer, but a fitting one for a political enforcer.

Unabashed Chekist Identity

Putin expresses a stronger public attachment to the internal security organs than the foreign intelligence services. "You now have your agent working under cover in the government," he told FSB officers in a speech celebrating the 82nd anniversary of the founding of the Bolshevik Cheka secret police in December 1999. The official government agency TASS reported he was only joking.(19) ("Many a true word is spoken in jest," commented a British correspondent>(20)) The rest of his speech was somber, warning against becoming too warm to Western ways and allowing the chekisti to become marginalized. "Several years ago we fell prey to an illusion that we have no enemies and we paid a dear price for that," he said. Even during its worst times, in Putin's view, the chekisti could do no wrong. "The bodies of state security have always defended the national interests of Russia," he continued. "They must not be separated from the state and turned into a monster."(21)

Two days later, Putin received the new Duma leaders in his Kremlin office. It was the 120th anniversary of the birth of Josef Stalin. Novaya gazeta reported that at the suggestion of an unidentified member, the group toasted Stalin by his original name, Dzhugashvili. No one has disputed the reports, and no evidence suggests Putin repudiated the toast; the contrary appears to be true.(22)

T

he chekists seem always to be on Putin's mind. "One of his first remarks after being appointed on New Year's Eve was to praise Russia's army of security services--FSB domestic counterintelligence, SVR foreign espionage, the FAPSI communications agency and GRU, the military's spies," Reuters reported. Putin pronounced, "The potential of the special services will not just be maintained but increased."(23) In a long discussion with the Moscow PEN writers' group, Putin tried to avoid answering questions about the KGB's role in Soviet state terror and repression. A transcript of the discussion has him addressing the chekists' role in the Stalin-era purges as follows: "Of course, one must not forget about the year 1937, but one must not keep alluding only to this experience, pretending that we do not need state security bodies. All the 17 years of

my work are connected with this organization. It would be insincere of me to say that I don't want to defend it."(24)

He tried to avoid casting any guilt on the chekisti for Stalin-era terror: "The state security bodies should not be seen as an institution that works against society and the state; one needs to understand what makes them work against their own people. If one recollects those hard years connected with the activities of the security bodies, and the damage they brought to society, one must keep in mind what sort of society it was. But that was an entirely different country. That country produced such security bodies."(25)

Putin has a point. But he misses the far larger point: The Soviet Union and Communist Party are gone and discredited though not entirely missed, while the chekisti and their entire cultlike devotion to their Bolshevik terrorist heritage, as Putin himself manifested in his 18 December speech to the security officers and his reluctance to criticize the Stalin era, remain a fundamental part of Russia's state security culture.

Less than two weeks after becoming acting president, Putin decreed the creation of what Segodnya called a new "super special service" to merge sections of the FSB and elite police units. Few gestures could express his mentality more vividly: One of the first orders of government was to grant more and more power to the secret services. This new security organ, apparently intended to root out official corruption, was just taking shape as this article was written.

The Persecution of Environmental Activists

Days before President Yel'tsin resigned, Putin visited St. Petersburg and popped into the local FSB office. He proclaimed himself "highly satisfied" with FSB operations, even though that service was embroiled at the time in a scandalous prosecution of retired Navy Captain Aleksandr Nikitin on charges of having committed "treason" for helping a Norwegian environmental group write a study of military nuclear waste in the Arctic. Three days later, the court threw out the charges and ruled that the FSB prosecution was illegal and violated the constitution.(26)

Nikitin is the most prominent example of the harassment and persecution environmental activists have endured in recent years, a development which began long before Putin entered the Moscow scene. Another prominent case is Grigory Pasko, another former Navy officer who spent 20 months in prison until his release last July. However, Putin embraced the campaign against those seeking to discover and clean up nuclear waste. After he became FSB chief in 1998, the harassment tempo quickened. Physicist Vladimir Soifer, researching nuclear waste from a submarine accident, found his home raided in July 1999. Other targets include: Vladimir Slivyak, an antinuclear activist accused of terrorism; Alexei Kozlov, questioned for suspected ties to "terrorism"; and Yakov Kochkaryov, jailed in September and reportedly forced to sign a "confession" admitting drug possession, a charge he denies.(27) In Severodvinsk, a local newspaper editor admitted publishing "FSB-fabricated lies" about Joshua Handler, an American Greenpeace colleague of Severodvinsk environmentalist Alexei Klimov.(28) Justine Hamilton, a US student-exchange coordinator, had to leave Russia after the FSB accused her of being a CIA spy.(29)

Lest there be any doubt about his personal involvement in the persecution of environmentalists, Putin told Komsomol'skaya pravda in July 1999 that a crackdown was necessary because the green activists are spies: "Sadly, foreign secret services ... very actively use all sorts of ecological ... organizations" for espionage against Russia. (30)

At the Epicenter of Corruption

Apart from involvement in political repression, the only other activity in Putin's past that could undermine his public appeal are claims that he had a hand in illicit "economic operations." Curiously, he has been at the epicenter of such actions at every major post he has held since serving in East Germany. However such allegations are hard to verify.

Dresden was the second-largest East German city for the illegal stripping of state resources and laundering of hard-currency proceeds to the West, and Putin had his finger on the pulse. Some reports link Putin to the Coordinating Committee (Ko-Ko), the

East German Communist Party organ that actually ran the resource theft, sale and hard-currency laundering operations. At the very least, Putin could have seen how the operation worked firsthand--a valuable experience for any Russian corruption-fighter (or his antagonist) who could see exactly how the pillaging system worked.

In St. Petersburg, as a deputy to Sobchak, Putin rose to handle the city's foreign and hard-currency operations. Investigative journalist Oleg Lurye of Novaya gazeta claims that Putin was involved in a range of questionable deals, including the "scandalous privatization of the Baltic Fleet and the Hotel Astoria in St. Petersburg," and with St. Petersburg organized crime figures.(31) City council members accused Putin of "mismanagement" of export licenses for local metals traders (in 1990, while he was still a KGB officer) and recommended that he be fired. Elsewhere, Lurye quoted from Ministry of Internal Affairs documents alleging "criminal activity--the exercise of official position for purposes of personal advancement--in regard to Putin," adding that Putin's post in the St. Petersburg city government "significantly impedes the activity of the investigative task force and allows [Mayor] A. Sobchak to feel relatively secure."(32)

Putin became Sobchak's main protector. When Sobchak himself faced corruption charges in 1996, Putin reportedly participated in arranging his flight to France on a chartered Finnair jet.(33) Sobchak did not return to Russia until Putin became prime minister.

After Sobchak's departure, the Kremlin tapped Putin. Albats reports that, contrary to popular perception, economic reform chief Anatoly Chubais was not the one who brought Putin to Moscow. Presidential property chief Pavel Borodin, she writes, hired Putin because he needed "assistance in overseeing the Kremlin's extensive foreign economic assets, mostly in the former Soviet bloc." Putin's East Germany experience made him the right candidate.(34) Borodin would become Putin's second consecutive boss to fall amid credible corruption allegations--in Borodin's case, in association with the Mabetex affair in which Swiss authorities issued a warrant for Borodin's arrest. By that time, however, Putin had been promoted. With Chubais' support, he became an

aide to Valentin Yumashev, next to Yel'tsin's daughter Tatyana Dyachenko, in charge of the "oversight department" to enforce loyalty among bureaucrats and regional governors across the Russian Federation.(35) Putin was now a member of The Family-- a loyal protector, not a corruption-fighter. In 1998, Putin became director of the FSB.

Years of simmering scandals about corruption in the FSB, including allegations of contract killings, bombings and hostage-taking, boiled over on Putin's watch in November 1998. FSB officers called a Moscow news conference to claim fellow officers, in the words of one accuser, used the service "to settle accounts with undesirable persons, to carry out private political and criminal orders for a fee, and sometimes simply as an instrument to earn money." They described a plot within the FSB to assassinate oligarch Boris Berezovsky and other acts of kidnapping and murder.(36)

An angry Putin had denied earlier allegations that the FSB was involved in extortion and murder rackets, and admitted that an internal probe of the alleged plot against Berezovsky had been terminated earlier in the year (apparently before he had been named FSB chief), only to be restarted. He threatened to sue newspapers and dissident FSB officers if the allegations were not proven true.(37)

While Putin did little if anything to combat corruption, he did everything possible to stand in the way of those who tried. He ordered Procurator General Yuri Skuratov, who was building corruption cases against members of The Family, to resign after the broadcast on state television of a video showing a man who looked just like Skuratov in a compromising position with two prostitutes. Putin publicly affirmed that the video was genuine, thus linking himself in the open to the dirty-tricks campaign.(38)

Putin Leads a Change of Public Mood

Putin's actions and his rhetoric show that he is not a professional intelligence officer but a political enforcer. As soon as he became prime minister, he unleashed a new way of thinking in Russia that finds it acceptable to use indiscriminate lethal force against entire peoples in order to achieve political goals. In so doing, he whipped up the worst of the

Soviet mentality that had lain fallow in the hearts of much of the Russian populace. "Russian politicians began to use a new language--the argot of the criminal world," notes Sergei Kovalev, a former dissident and lawmaker who served as President Yel'tsin's human rights chief. "The recently appointed prime minister was the first to legitimate this new language" with his prison and outhouse slang when referring to Chechnya.(39)

"Old terms took on a completely new meaning. Thus, the word 'terrorist' quickly ceased to mean someone belonging to a criminal underground group whose goal was political murder," according to Kovalev. When the government talked of rounding up the Chechens into camps, "apart from a handful of human rights activists, no one was shocked by these barbaric ideas. The position of human rights activists themselves changed and the name acquired a new meaning. Today, human rights workers and organizations are considered the country's primary internal enemies, a 'fifth column' supported by Western foundations (read: secret services), and conducting subversive activities against Russia."(40)

Western perceptions of Russian politics have not created a category for the type of coalition ruling Russia under Putin; if one states support for economic reform and arms control, one is logically a "reformer." The truth is much deeper. Kovalev argues that the Second Chechnya War "was planned in advance" in order to promote domestic political goals. "It is a question that is unpleasant even to contemplate. These plans do not bear the stamp of the older generation of Communists or the fanatic younger supporters of Great Russian Statehood, whose reactionary influence on the life of the country I so feared at one time," Kovalev writes:

"Instead, they are in keeping with the bold, dynamic, and deeply cynical cycle of a new political generation. It is unlikely that, after next March, President Putin will either resurrect Soviet power or resuscitate the archaic myths of Russian statehood. More likely he will build a regime which has a long tradition in Western history but is utterly new in Russia: an authoritarian-police regime that will preserve the formal

characteristics of democracy, and will most likely try to carry out reforms leading to a market economy. This regime may be outspokenly anti-Communist, but it's not inconceivable that the Communists will be tolerated, as long as they don't 'interfere.' However, life will not be sweet for Russia's fledgling civil society.(41)"

The young economic reformers around Anatoly Chubais who have so enamored the United States are likely to embrace such a police state, in Kovalev's view, "as they have already supported the second Chechnya war."(42)

One should expect a degree of economic reform under a Putin regime; few dispute the need if Russia is to recover. One should also expect some aggressive prosecutions of high-profile figures on corruption charges. They will, in all likelihood, be more political moves than honest corruption-fighting, just as the Cheka used the corruption epithet to smash its "class enemies," or as Andropov employed the KGB selectively to expose corruption to undermine his Brezhnevite rivals. Any other way simply is not part of Putin's chekist genetic code.

Notes:

1. Yevgenia Albats, "Power Play: Does a KGB Resume Make Putin a Stalin?" Moscow Times, 13 January 2000; Bill Powell and Yevgenia Albats, "Who is Vladimir Putin? A Look at His Rise to Power," Newsweek, 17 January 2000.
2. Michael Wines, "Putin Once Decorated as Spy, but Few Agree on His Deeds," The New York Times, 10 January 2000; and Martin Woollacott, "Russia's New Boss Has an Extremely Strange History," The Guardian (London), 7 January 2000.
3. US intelligence sources interviewed by the author, January 2000. Stratfor.com issued a similar assessment.
4. Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, KGB: The Inside Story (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), p. 621.

5. Powell and Albats.
6. Victor Yasmann, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.
7. Ibid.
8. Michael Wines, "On Top, Still a Mystery: New President for Russia," The New York Times, 1 January 2000.
9. Powell and Albats.
10. Vladimir Kryuchkov, interview in Moskovsky novosti, 25 January 2000.
11. Victor Yasmann, interview with author. Yasmann expands on this in a forthcoming Radio Liberty paper.
12. Jozef Darski, "Police Agents in the Transition Period," Uncaptive Minds, Vol. 4, No. 4, Winter 1991-1992, pp. 15-16; and Joachim Gauck, interview with author.
13. J. Michael Waller, Secret Empire: The KGB In Russia Today (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), p. 90.
14. The most prominent is Gen. Viktor Cherkesov, a KGB First Chief Directorate officer in Leningrad/St. Petersburg. Former dissident Georgy Mikhailov and others tell the author that Cherkesov personally interrogated and persecuted them for their activities in the 1970s. As of this writing, Cherkesov is first deputy director of the Federal Security Service and is likely to head a new internal security apparatus that Putin is developing officially to fight corruption, and unofficially to extend political control into the regions.
15. Putin's official resume is posted on the Russian government web site at <http://www.government.gov.ru:8080/government/minister/index.html>.

16. Powell and Albats.

17. Richard C. Paddock, "The KGB Rises Again in Russia," Los Angeles Times, 12 January 2000.

18. Andrei Piontkovsky, "Stasi for President," Russia Journal, 17-23 January 2000, citing former prime minister and former St. Petersburg internal security chief Sergei Stepashin.

19. ITAR-TASS, 19 December 1999.

20. Helen Womack, "Putin's Rivals Fear He Is Leader of KGB 'Silent Coup,'" The Independent (London), 5 January 2000.

21. ITAR-TASS, 18 December 1999.

22. Arnold Beichman, weekly column in The Washington Times, 10 January 2000, citing Novaya gazeta and Obshchaya gazeta.

23. Reuters, dispatch from Moscow, 6 January 2000.

24. David Hoffman, "Putin Steps Out of the Shadows," Washington Post, 30 January 2000.

25. Ibid.

26. Lori Montgomery, Knight Ridder dispatch from St. Petersburg, 9 January 2000.

27. Geoffrey York, "Green Activists Face Crackdown in Russia," Toronto Globe and Mail, 27 October 1999.

28. Thomas Nilsen, "More Media Lies About Environmentalists," Bellona Foundation (Oslo) website, 16 December 1999; <http://www.bellona.org>.
29. Montgomery.
30. Ibid., citing Komsomol'skaya pravda.
31. Inna Rogatchi, "Putin and His Shadows," Ilta-Sanomat (Helsinki), 1 February 2000. Translation provided by Rogatchi.
32. Oleg Lurye and Inga Savelyeva, "Putin: Four Questions for the Heir to the Throne," Versiya, 17-23 August 1999.
33. Ibid.
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35. Ibid.
36. The Independent, 17 November 1999.
37. Monitor, Jamestown Foundation, 17 November 1999.
38. Philip Sherwell and Tony Paterson, "Putin Accused of Blackmail Plot to Defend Yeltsin Family," Daily Telegraph (London) 16 January 2000.
39. Sergei Kovalev, "Putin's War," The New York Review of Books, 10 February 2000.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.

42. Ibid.

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